

Ana Leonard

Global Currents in Contemporary Art

27 April 2022

### Boryana Rossa

Boryana Rossa is an interdisciplinary artist who works in the diverse fields of electronic arts, film, video, performance, and photography. Rossa was born in Sofia, Bulgaria in 1972, and on top of being a visual artist, she is a performer, curator, researcher, and writer. Her work is described as politically and socially conscious. She graduated from the National Academy of Arts in Bulgaria in 1997, where she was learning under the Socialist traditions that encouraged monumental public art and large-scale mural painting. After this, she actually turned to an interest in photography and began to use her own body in her work. She co-founded ULTRAFUTURO in 2004, an art collective which engaged with issues of technology, science, and their social impacts. She also holds a PhD and MFA in Electronic Arts from Rensselaer University, Troy, NY and a PhD on Post Cold War Gender Performances. In 2012 when she got her PhD in electronic arts, her thesis examined gender-based performance that focused on cross-cultural analysis through film re-enactments. She states three words that describe her art are technology, body and gender. A quoted statement by her that sums up the root of her interest is “my work gravitates around the question of how our social, cultural and political identities are shaped by the use of technology and the application of scientific knowledge. More specifically I am interested in how, influenced by the new technological and scientific advances, we rediscover our bodies and often try to shape them or represent them accordingly. By these representations of

“the body(ies)” we produce social and political constructs and develop cultures and economies. They, on their side, produce conflicts, but also solidarities that are subjects of my work.”<sup>1</sup>

“Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the street”, by Judith Butler, is an article written about the concept of the body as a piece of defense, particularly in terms of occupying public spaces and the power of the congregation of bodies in a political frame. Thinking about spaces, and how a space transforms when bodies fill these spaces with specific purpose, Butler says “the collective actions collect the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate and organize the architecture.”<sup>2</sup> Butler seems to be claiming that the space becomes a part of the material for the assembly, but the true space happens between people. Location is not necessarily important, only an aid, or “material” for the purpose applied to it. Action has the power to create location. Butler then ties in this concept that the individual body needs support, or exposure, of some sort to make impact. A summation of these thoughts comes together in her saying “bodies themselves are modalities of power, embodied interpretations, engaging in allied action. On the one hand, these bodies are productive and performative. On the other hand, they can only persist and act when they are supported, by environments, by nutrition, by work, by modes of sociality and belonging.”<sup>3</sup> This article will be related below to two of Boryana Rossa’s Art pieces, *Vitruvian Body*, and *Amazon Armor*.

*Vitruvian Body*, 2009, by Boryana Rossa is a performance piece in which Rossa embodies the “ideal proportions” on the human body as described by Vitruvius, a Roman architect. Fully nude, she inserted her ligaments into the holes of a metal construction that was built for this performance specifically, which mirrors that of the original Vitruvius drawing of a

---

<sup>1</sup> “Boryana Rossa.” Open Art Files

<sup>2</sup> Butler, Judith. 2011. “Bodies in Alliance and Politics on the Street”.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, Judith. 2011. “Bodies in Alliance and Politics on the Street”.

man's body framed within a circle, representing the ideal proportions using geometry. She is tied to the metal frame, and exposed for her audience to be able to photograph, and share whatever they want, as close or far from her as they please. She is speaking throughout the performance about what led her to do this piece. "This collaborative work with the audience is applied to almost all of my recent performances. It reflects the era of digital and Internet technologies, which allowed people to create their own news and mythologies,"<sup>4</sup> Boryana states. She obviously wants to challenge the archetype of the classical ideal of the body. To further this performance, she commented on censorship by the Czech Republic by having her lips sewn shut in front of the audience, to which she was eventually freed by an audience member, which seems to have allowed the audience to observe her pain as well as her relieving liberation.

Another series that uses the body was her piece four years later *Amazon Armor*, 2013 and 2014, a performance art photo series. In her summary of this series, which actually consists of more than one of her pieces including "Pervert Veggies" 1,2,3, 2013 ; "Madona of the External Silicone Breast" 2014 and "Deconstruction of VALIE EXPORT'S "Touch and Tap Cinema", she says this series is "representing my thoughts on the body as an active political agent that constructs the attitude towards ourselves and the others."<sup>5</sup> To which she follows up by mentioning that this work is inspired by her experiences with having to get a double mastectomy, and the myths of the Amazons, who were women-warriors who cut off their breasts to aid their efficiency in the use of their bows. Art critic Nadia Plungian describes this work as a deep understanding of this issue: "one must stop imitating others in order to openly state one's identity and acknowledge its fluidity by once and for all rejecting neurotic, heteronormative

---

<sup>4</sup> "Works – Boryana Rossa."

<sup>5</sup> "Works – Boryana Rossa."

self-determination.”<sup>6</sup> In the photos, Rossa is often playing with vegetables and objects that are meant to be a sexualized substitute, symbolic of a prosthesis for the breast. Many of these images feel playful, and curious, and ironic while still being suggestive and highlighting gender-queer reconfiguration and construction in the sphere of identity.

Both of the works under *Amazon Armor* and *Vitruvian Body* can be related back to the topics discussed in Judith Butler’s “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street”. Butler says, “for politics to take place, the body must appear.”<sup>7</sup> This is shown in the majority of Boryana Rossa’s work. She is interested in the use of the body in activism, and how the use of the body catches a type of attention that may not always be given to political art that does not use the body directly. The body creates empathy in others, as Butler discusses, this can be shown outside of art especially in times when the body is congregated in order to demonstrate for or against something. This is prevalent in political performance art such as Boryana Rossa’s, but on a different level because Boryana Rossa is seeking out an audience and viewers to witness her protests and positions of the political standpoints that she supports and is wanting to give attention to through her work. *Vitruvian Body* does this in a way that demands empathy from the audience, as they experience her pain and suffering directly in front of them, and observe her until she is freed from it. The series within *Amazon Armor* are Rossa’s responses directly to her voiced interest in the use of the body as an active political agent, which juxtaposes Butler’s point of view smoothly. Butler reminds us that “for the body to exist politically, it has to assume a social dimension”<sup>8</sup> which shines through very obviously in the art of Boryana Rossa.

---

<sup>6</sup> “Works – Boryana Rossa.”

<sup>7</sup> Butler, Judith. 2011. “Bodies in Alliance and Politics on the Street”.

<sup>8</sup> Butler, Judith. 2011. “Bodies in Alliance and Politics on the Street”.

## Artworks Cited



Boryana Rossa, *Vitruvian Body*, 2009.



Boryana Rossa, image from *Amazon Armor*, 2013-14

## Bibliography

- “Boryana D Rossa.” Brooklyn Museum: Boryana D Rossa. Accessed April 27, 2021.  
[https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/about/feminist\\_art\\_base/boryana-d-rossa](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/about/feminist_art_base/boryana-d-rossa).
- “Boryana Dragoeva (Rossa).” College of Visual and Performing Arts, August 10, 2020.  
<https://vpa.syr.edu/people/boryana-dragoeva-rossa/>.
- “Boryana Rossa (Dragoeva): Syracuse University / Curriculum Vitae.” Academia.edu. Accessed April 27, 2021. <https://syr.academia.edu/BoryanaDragoeva/CurriculumVitae>.
- “Boryana Rossa.” AWARE Women artists / Femmes artistes. Accessed April 27, 2021.  
<https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/boryana-rossa/>.
- “Boryana Rossa.” Open Art Files. Accessed April 27, 2021.  
<http://openartfiles.bg/en/people/2496-boryana-rossa>.
- “Boryana Rossa.” SVA Bio Art Lab. Accessed April 27, 2021.  
<https://bioart.sva.edu/guest/boryana-rossa/>.
- Butler, Judith. “Bodies in Alliance and Politics on the Street,” 2011.
- D’Urso, Sandra. “On Abjection.” *Performance Research* 23, no. 4-5 (2018): 141–45.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2018.1506543>.
- Honorato, Dalila. “Taboo, Transgression, Transcendence in Art and Science.” *Technoetic Arts*, 2017, 177–87.

Kosmala, Katarzyna, Inga Fonar Cocos, Mark Gisbourne, Marina Grzinic, Beata Hock, Pawel Leszkowicz, Iliyana Nedkova, Agata Rogos, and Boryana Rossa. *Sexing the Border: Gender, Art and New Media in Central and Eastern Europe*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2014.

“Works – Boryana Rossa.” Accessed April 27, 2021. <https://boryanarossa.com/category/works/>.